

**Without Explanations**  
**Luke 9:28-43; Exodus 34:29-35**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**

**Exodus 34:29-35**

<sup>29</sup>Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. <sup>30</sup>When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

<sup>31</sup>But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

<sup>32</sup>Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

<sup>33</sup>When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; <sup>34</sup>but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, <sup>35</sup>the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

**Luke 9:28-43**

<sup>28</sup>Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

<sup>29</sup>And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

<sup>30</sup>Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup>They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

<sup>32</sup>Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

<sup>33</sup>Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

<sup>34</sup>While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup>Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

<sup>36</sup>When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

<sup>37</sup>On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.

<sup>38</sup>Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. <sup>39</sup>Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. <sup>40</sup>I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.”

<sup>41</sup>Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer do I have to be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.”

<sup>42</sup>While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

<sup>43</sup>And all were astounded at the greatness of God. ■

## The Sermon

After Jesus had been transfigured;  
when the faith giants of the distant past had appeared with him;  
when the voice had spoken,  
on the mountaintop with just a few of them,  
Jesus was found alone.

And they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Have you ever had an experience, or maybe just a moment,  
when you felt God very near to you,  
and very real to you?

What did it feel like? What did you see?  
And what did it lead you to believe  
about God, and you, and your relationship to God,  
and God's relationship to your *life*,  
and God's relationship to *all life*,  
and *your* relationship to all life?

I am wondering if there has been a time when you felt God very near to you, and very real to you.

What did you see,  
and what did it lead you to think or believe or understand or feel?

Eighteen years ago, I brought a small, newly put-together youth group to the Montreat Youth Conference for their first time, and having not had a youth group to be part of, let alone ever having had the chance to come to something like Montreat, they had a week's worth of powerful experiences—as individuals, and as a small group together.

They came to Montreat, and they went, like so many thousands before them, to the mountaintop.

Always the return home from that kind of experience is a mixed bag of emotions. You find yourself dealing with what you saw, and how you felt, and what it led you to believe about many things—some of them fundamental.

If the week can be compared to a worship service, time in the van on the way back is the postlude: the group members who have just had this experience with each other are still together, but the group dynamic, unique to that specific place and time, is already starting to dissolve, even despite everybody's deep desire to make it continue.

But the change of context—from the mountaintop down to the “plain,” as in the plain, old, regular day-to-day world we live in—inevitably reframes all of those thoughts, and plays havoc with the way the memory feels.

So we came back down the mountain figuratively and literally, and then there was the emotional Sheol of dispersing at the church, unloading the van and waiting for parents to come and, one by one, extract each of the young people from the last shreds of the cocoon of the group dynamic.

I was carrying some equipment back into the church, and one of the young people, a grad named Jason who had essentially just had the last and most powerful experience he would ever have as a member of the church youth group, was outside chatting with one of the other parents who was there to pick up his daughter—a family who had known Jason for all of his life.

I was sad to see that by the time I got back outside, Jason had gone home, and I hadn't had a chance to have that moment of closure with him, just to say goodbye and thanks for a great week.

Later, I learned that while Jason had been talking with the other parent, who was not a member of any church, the clueless parent had asked Jason what the week had been like, and Jason had said something like, “It was a really powerful experience.”

And the guy said, “Did you get closer to God?”

And Jason thought for a second and said, “Yeah, I really did.”

And the parent who didn’t know anything about church smiled for a second and, using non-pulpit language which I will now clean up, laughingly said, “You’re so full of it, Jason.”

Jason took it hard. After that he had just gotten in his car and gone home. It had sounded, or felt, to him, at that unexpectedly delicate moment, like his sincerity was being doubted.

Or maybe it felt like the guy was saying that the spiritual experience he’d had at Montreat wasn’t a legitimate spiritual experience.

Or maybe the guy was sort of saying, “We’ve known each other since you were a kid, and we’ve always been rational people. Surely you haven’t actually become one of those *religious* people. Surely you’re just pulling my leg.”

Whatever the motivation or meaning, I kind of suspect that the guy said it because he couldn’t relate.

And either he was jealous of Jason having had an experience that he himself had never had—specifically, an experience of being open to God—or he was just fundamentally uncomfortable with the possibility that something had actually happened that neither one of them could explain.

Either way, I was kind of sad for that guy. Cynical people may be laughing, but it doesn't come from a wellspring of joy or happiness.

But I was especially heartbroken for Jason.

He had tried to articulate something honest about something enormous and deep that he had just come back from witnessing and experiencing. And somebody he should have been able to rely on had, unwittingly or not, spat it back in Jason's face.

About ten years ago there was an American serviceman on a ship on the Indian Ocean, and before dawn he had been walking on the deck when the wind suddenly blew a door open and it had knocked him over the railing and down into the unimaginably deep water. The ship, with no one else on deck to have witnessed what happened, sailed on.

He followed his training and took his trousers off and tied each leg at the ankles, bringing the waistline down onto the surface of the water and trapping air inside the pant legs to use as a flotation device.

You have to repeat that process about every three minutes or so.

He stayed afloat, and he kept at it, and the day passed, and the long, dark, starry night came, and passed, and then another day, and another night.

What do you think about? What conversations do you have with God during those unimaginable hours?

Astonishingly, miraculously, on the third day, a Pakistani fishing boat that had strayed much further out than they had intended came within hailing distance, and they found him and pulled him to safety.

After having finally made it back home after that breathtaking story of survival—a tiny human being adrift in the most incomprehensible loneliness—when asked questions about it, he was good natured and

friendly, and could answer factual questions about what had happened. But asked to reflect further, he would just kind of shrug his shoulders.

How do you put words to that kind of experience?

There are the combat veterans who go fifty, sixty, seventy years without talking about it with anybody except, possibly, the people who fought alongside them. Or, amazingly, sometimes with the people who fought against them: they too are among the few who share that singular experience.

When a movie was made about Apollo 13, the moon mission that had to be aborted when an emergency threatened to strand three people in a small contraption in outer space, Tom Hanks, who played Commander Jim Lovell, talked about meeting Lovell and some of the other people who had lived through the events. The actors were looking for any insights they could pick up about what it had meant to live through it.

When asked what they had gleaned from meeting the actual astronauts, Tom Hanks said they just saw themselves as guys who were doing their jobs. "They weren't poets."

What did you see? How did you feel? And what did it lead you to believe?

Sometimes there's not much that can be put into words simple enough for someone else to understand.

Recalling the experience, many centuries earlier, of those who had seen Moses after he had come down from the mountain having spoken with God, Jesus was transfigured in the sight of James, Peter and John.

Something holy happened on that mountain.

And their response was silence, even after they came back down and rejoined the others.

Then they watched Jesus perform a miraculous healing that was wonderful for that family; cosmic in its power; and apparently so easy for him that he seems like he kind of resents having had to do it, since his disciples had tried once and botched it.

And all were amazed at the greatness of God.

We are about to begin Lent, starting this Wednesday. There is nothing magical about Lent that comes from outside; However much or little you want from it comes from how deeply you want to go as far as engaging in its spiritual discipline.

I'm reminded of the words of Will Weng, who was the crosswords editor of the New York Times. Somebody asked about people looking up answers. Wasn't that cheating? Isn't the whole idea of a crossword puzzle to show whether or not you can figure out or remember all those answers on your own? And he said, with refreshingly simple clarity, "It's your puzzle. Solve it any way you like."<sup>i</sup>

Same thing with Lent. It's your spiritual discipline, meant for you to prepare for Easter the way you choose to do.

For those of us who will enter into it, we'll need to be able to process at a very deep level.

Transfiguration Sunday, especially in the way that the disciples who were there are said to have responded to the event, offers all of us an assurance that you don't always have to be able to come up with words for the astonishing presence of God, and what it means to you.

You are not required to be able to articulate everything in a way that somebody who wasn't there will be able to "get it."

Because a lot of times, when we try to articulate something  
so imbued with holiness,  
so filled with mystery,  
so indicative of God's personal interest in us,  
we just end up reducing it to something suitable for mass consumption—  
something that won't make us look weird,  
something that says to the world,  
“Yeah, I have some beliefs and go to church, but don't worry—  
you can trust me not to make any big deal out of it.”

So what had been a mystical moment, wherein God reached out to you  
from the field of holiness that saturates the world we see, becomes, in  
the retrospective telling, like it was nothing at all.

Jesus comes to us without explanation, without needing the crutch of the  
language of reason or logic or easy decipherability.

Maybe astonishment, rather than comprehension, is a reasonable  
expectation for the baffling beauty and demanding grace in which God's  
presence and reality are made known to each of us,

and maybe that astonishment at the greatness of God is the best  
equipment we can carry with us as we go out into a world crying out for  
justice and hope and mercy and love in ways that we don't even know  
we are capable of being part of.

Will Willimon said,

“The modern, essentially atheistic mentality despises mystery and  
considers enchantment and befuddlement an affront to its democratic  
right to know—and then use—everything for purposes of individual  
fulfillment.

This flattened mind loves lists, labels, solutions, sweeping propositions, and practical principles.

The vast, cosmic claims of the gospel get reduced to an answer to [one question]: ‘What’s in it for me?’”<sup>ii</sup>

Sometimes, you can’t articulate it. Maybe we’re not supposed to be able to.

The late Luke scholar Francois Bovon wrote, “The divine reality shines through human reality like lightning: in the annunciation to Mary, at the baptism, at the transfiguration, and at Easter. Not only salvation history, a category of time, but also the divine sphere, a category of space, becomes accessible...”<sup>iii</sup>

Have you ever had an experience, or maybe just a moment,  
when you felt God very near to you, and very real to you?

What did it feel like? What did you see?

And what did it lead you to believe?

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<sup>i</sup> Deb Amlen, “How to Solve The New York Times Crossword” (<https://www.nytimes.com/guides/crosswords/how-to-solve-a-crossword-puzzle>, accessed February 9, 2019)

<sup>ii</sup> Will Willimon, in “Power Pointless: The way we distill the gospel for presentation can take the life out of it” in *Leadership* (Summer 2007)

<sup>iii</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1* (Hermeneia series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 381